

Ely Stefansky Ratner, of Massachusetts, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; Shawn Graham Skelly, of Virginia, to be an Assistant Secretary of Defense; Meredith Berger, of Florida, to be an Assistant Secretary of the Navy; Gina Maria Ortiz Jones, of Texas, to be Under Secretary of the Air Force; and Caroline Diane Krass, of the District of Columbia, to be General Counsel of the Department of Defense.

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and be in a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ELECTIONS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I will get right to the point: the very definition of democracy in the United States is under attack. You see it in State legislatures across the country. Powerful partisans advancing bill after bill to restrict voters' access to the ballot box. It flies in the face of the very evolution of progress.

Gone are the days when voters rode on horseback or walked for miles to cast their ballot. Technological advances, commonsense understandings of the daily lives of hard-working Americans—all these things and more recommend an open, accessible, expanded, and secure election process. Yet instead of seizing these opportunities to ensure every voice, every vote counts, partisan efforts are afoot to take us back—back to a time when senseless barriers were erected to block the votes of very specific communities.

The U.S. Senate—the democratically elected U.S. Senate—should not stand for such an assault on our democracy. And every Senator who swears the oath of office should stand up and stand against this bitter attack on the ballot box.

Protecting the right to vote has long been bipartisan. I stood alongside my dear friend, himself a soldier in the war against voter oppression, John Lewis, when we reauthorized the Voting Rights Act in 2006. And it was with a heavy—but hopeful—heart that I reintroduced the Voting Rights Advancement Act last year to bear his name. I will soon do so again. This bipartisan legislation should advance, and quickly.

Now is the time for every American—regardless of party, regardless of politics—to stand in defense of our democracy. To stand for what is right, and to stand with the clear arc of history—the arc that bends toward justice, toward inclusion, towards equality. With one loud and clear voice, we should reject erosions of voter protections. And we should do so now.

Vermont has always been at the forefront of expanding access to the ballot, and one of our State's leaders in that fight has been Secretary of State Jim Condos. I ask unanimous consent that a column by Secretary Condos, published in the July 14 edition of The Times Argus, be printed in the RECORD. There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Times Argus, July 14, 2021]

OUR DEMOCRACY IS AT A CROSSROADS

(By Jim Condos)

“The vote is precious. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democratic society, and we must use it”—John Lewis

This month we celebrated the birth of our nation.

Since its inception, American democracy has undergone continual transformation. During the past 245 years, many activists and advocates have fought tirelessly to expand the franchise that our democratic ideals depend on: the right to vote.

From suffragettes to civil rights leaders, their work has ensured that the march of progress has been oriented forward, focused on increasing access to the ballot box.

This Independence Day was an opportunity to reflect on the resiliency of our country and of our democracy. There has been no shortage of challenges during the past year and a half. Despite these challenges, we achieved record breaking turnout for a general election, which nonpartisan experts have described as the most secure and the most scrutinized election in U.S. history. We were able to do so with common-sense voting reforms, providing voters with more options for receiving and casting their ballot.

After the ballot counting was completed, and the careful town by town certification process took place, we had official results and a list of election winners and losers, just like every other general election in memory.

Unlike other election years, what has followed has brought our democracy to a crossroads. Without producing any evidence, the former president and his allies have used known false voter-fraud claims as justification for their attempts to use state legislatures and phony ‘fraudits’ to supersede the will of the people and, more significantly, to restrict access to the ballot box.

Our democratic principles should have to endure constant debate. However, willfully disregarding the certified, official election results in an effort to circumvent the will of the people and prevent the peaceful transition of power sets our country on a dangerous path.

Sending us even further into treacherous territory, some state legislatures are using ‘the Big Lie’ to roll back the voter access expansions made during 2020, and to further suppress voting rights through measures such as the implementation of more restrictive voter ID laws, limits on the ballot-by-mail request period, elimination or reduction in ballot drop boxes, and closure of polling precincts.

After record-breaking turnout in 2020, and with zero evidence of widespread fraud or election rigging, why would they want to make it harder for eligible Americans to vote? The answer is simple: because they were unhappy with the results and want fewer people to vote.

Overall, there have been over 350 bills introduced in 47 states with the sole purpose of reducing access to the ballot. In June alone, 17 state legislatures enacted 28 new voter restriction laws. A small few include reasonable, understandable reforms.

Most make no sense at all. It is clear that some lawmakers would prefer to pick their voters, rather than voters picking their representatives.

Frankly, I am concerned for our nation. We stand at a crossroads, and the decisions we make now will ripple throughout time.

There is hope. In Vermont, we saw the record turnout as a positive, so we made the mailing of ballots to all voters a permanent fixture of Vermont general elections. We also created a new pathway for voters to correct a defective ballot so that their vote will count. We did this by working across the aisles with the support of Democrats, Republicans, Progressives and independents.

In the face of the alarming rise in state-level attacks on voting rights, we cannot afford to wait for solutions one-by-one in all 50 states. With the gutting of the Voting Rights Act by the Supreme Court, we no longer have the luxury of a ‘wait and see’ approach. Congress can, and must, create minimum voter access and fairness standards that states must abide by, so that eligible voters are not being denied their voting rights.

The true voter fraud in this country is denying any eligible American their right to register and vote.

Congress alone can put an end to restrictive and unnecessary obstacles to voting, prohibit racebased and partisan gerrymandering, make automatic, online and same day voter registration the law of the land, and make voting by mail accessible for every voter, regardless of which side of an invisible line you live on.

Two federal bills pending, the For the People Act, and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, give Congress this opportunity to act. The time has come for the partisan, political games to stop. Those who are prioritizing the promotion of politically motivated falsehoods about the security of our elections, over the voting rights of the people who put them in office, are committing a severe dereliction of duty.

In 2021, our democracy has come to a crossroads. Fortunately, we have a roadmap, we just need to follow it.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, since the start of the pandemic, the State of Vermont, at every level of its leadership, has taken heroic efforts to mitigate spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus. With strong leadership from Gov. Phil Scott, and bolstered by a firm belief in scientific facts, the State nearly halted altogether the spread of COVID-19, minimized the number of Vermonters lost to the disease, and now leads the Nation in the percentage of residents who have received at least one vaccine shot. As we look to hopefully soon be on the other side of this pandemic, I strongly believe that there are invaluable lessons to be learned from Vermont's response, so that we are better prepared for the days, months, and years ahead.

Aisha K. Jha's ‘Vermont's and South Dakota's COVID Infection Rates are Remarkably Similar—But their Outcomes are Not’ article published in the Washington Post on July 13, 2021, reviews the important steps Vermont took to not only protect the health of its residents but also ensure that minimal economic damage was done given

the circumstances. A strong public health approach, led by Vermont Health Commissioner Mark Levine, always communicated scientific evidence clearly and thoughtfully. This fostered a sense of trust and community that has now resulted in Vermont nearing herd immunity and able to fully reopen local businesses for everyone to enjoy.

I am so proud of every Vermonter who stepped up to do their part to not only protect themselves, but their families, friends, and neighbors. This is truly the Vermont way. I know that if all States followed Vermont's example, and continued to vaccinate all residents, we would be able to put this dark chapter of American history in our rearview mirror.

I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD the article mentioned above, about the important work in Vermont to protect our State from the COVID-19 pandemic.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From the Washington Post, July 13, 2021]

VERMONT'S AND SOUTH DAKOTA'S COVID INFECTION RATES ARE REMARKABLY SIMILAR—BUT THEIR OUTCOMES ARE NOT

(By Ashish K. Jha)

Two states. Two different paths in responding to COVID-19. Together, they offer invaluable lessons about the road ahead for the nation—especially as infection rates creep up because of the delta variant.

The two states are Vermont and South Dakota. Both feature among the three states that COVID Act Now classifies as falling in the lowest-risk category, along with Massachusetts. This may be a surprise. While New England states are known to have done extraordinarily well in vaccinating their populations, South Dakota is in the middle of the pack. So, what explains the fact that South Dakota has infection numbers almost as low as Vermont, the most vaccinated state in the nation?

Let's start with some basics. Vermont and South Dakota share several important similarities. Both have relatively White, older and rural populations. They have comparable median incomes. Both states have Republican governors, challenging the simplistic notion that COVID risk is a partisan phenomenon.

Over the past two months, the rates of infection in Vermont and South Dakota have appeared remarkably similar. Both states have seen steep declines in cases, making both states near the best in terms of infections per population.

But this is where the similarity ends. While nearly 75 percent of Vermonters have had at least one vaccine shot, putting the state near the threshold for herd immunity, only half of South Dakotans have had at least one shot. South Dakota's substantial population immunity instead comes in large part from prior infections, particularly during the fall. This massive surge in infections was driven by the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in August that brought nearly half a million people to South Dakota, sparking outbreaks across that state and, indeed, the nation. With little to no interest on the part of its governor to squelch the outbreak, South Dakota reached the highest levels of infection seen by any state during the pandemic. At its peak, the state was reporting more than 160 new cases per 100,000 residents. Vermont, in comparison, never climbed above 30 cases per 100,000.

Unsurprisingly, these states experienced stunningly different outcomes. Adjusted for population, nearly six times as many people died in South Dakota from covid-19 as in Vermont (230 per 100,000 in South Dakota compared to just 40 per 100,000 in Vermont). In real numbers, while about 250 Vermont residents died from the disease, more than 2,000 South Dakotans died. And as of today, Vermont has a lower unemployment rate, suggesting that there need not be any trade-off between public health and the economy.

By some estimates, nearly half of the people of South Dakota may have been infected. These infections led to huge amounts of suffering beyond the deaths themselves. We are seeing an increasing body of evidence that many who survive serious illness from the virus have long-term complications and symptoms. When infections spike, a run on hospital beds means other people die because they can't access hospital care, which almost surely occurred in South Dakota at the height of the surge. Vermont took a different approach, keeping public health measures in place to keep infections low and then, building up population immunity through excellent vaccination campaigns.

The virus isn't going away. In fact, it is likely to become endemic, meaning it will continue to circulate, occasionally causing outbreaks in low-vaccination communities. Most people will encounter the virus at one point or another. And if they don't have immunity from vaccines, many will get sick. The harms from infection are large, especially in comparison to the generally mild side-effects of the vaccines. And there is some evidence that the vaccine-induced immunity is more effective than natural infection-induced immunity. As the highly contagious delta variant spreads, states that have experienced high levels of infection such as South Dakota may be more vulnerable than highly vaccinated states such as Vermont.

In the spring of 2020, governors had to make decisions with little federal guidance and little historical precedent. But by that summer, it was much clearer how to curtail the disease, protect public health and manage the economy carefully. By following the science, Vermont saved an enormous number of lives and has now reached a degree of population immunity through vaccination that makes large outbreaks unlikely. Embracing a policy of "personal responsibility," South Dakota did little to protect its residents, leading to the deaths of more than 2,000 South Dakotans and the suffering of tens of thousands more. To avoid more unnecessary outbreaks, we need to learn from states that have successfully weathered the pandemic, follow the science and keep vaccinating Americans.

REMEMBERING HARRY CHAPIN

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, it has been 40 years since the Nation lost a champion for the hungry, and the American people lost a talented and inspirational musical artist. And I lost a dear partner and friend.

I was proud to have been able to work side by side with Harry Chapin on several projects to address hunger, here at home, and in the world. We strategized. We met with other Senators to build support. And I got to know him well. He stayed at our home and even sang for our enthralled children. I was with him on the grounds of the Capitol Building when he pulled out his guitar and gave an impromptu

concert. Passersby were drawn to him, and it was one more magical moment, among so many with Harry.

Harry had incredible energy and drive and commitment to his goals. Bill Ayres, a former Catholic priest who cofounded the organization WhyHunger with Harry, has noted that Harry used to say: "When in doubt, do something." And do something, he certainly did. Since its founding in 1975, WhyHunger has raised more than \$30 million to help more than 10 million families, children, veterans, and others around the world gain access to nutritious food and vital services.

One of Harry's ideas was to convince President Jimmy Carter to form a Commission on world hunger. I readily signed on to help him. When we had that meeting with the President in the Cabinet Room, Harry's persistence was on overdrive. President Carter agreed to establish the Commission. So that goal was in hand. But Harry kept telling the President why we should do this, and President Carter kept trying to tell Harry that he agreed with him. Harry was wound up and excited to have the chance to lay out the case for a Commission. And I finally said: "Harry, don't talk him out of it." Everyone laughed because we all knew that it was a moment that distilled the pure energy for which we all loved and admired him.

I worked with Senator Byron Dorgan and others in gaining authorization for a Congressional Gold Medal, which I was honored to carry to a memorial concert at Carnegie Hall to present to Harry's family. Harry Belafonte and Bruce Springsteen were there and so were so many others who had known and worked with Harry. Harry Belafonte, whom I also admire so deeply, has said this:

I grew to really admire him, not only for his commitment to the cause of hunger, but also the fact that he did it with such passion, such real commitment. As an artist, I certainly loved his work. Not only his music, but the content of his words. He spoke about the human condition with a sense of humor and as a lyricist he had his hand on the pulse of social needs.

A few years ago, I received a letter from a 16-year-old Canadian boy in Newmarket, Ontario, Ryan Kruger. He had heard about my work with Harry and wanted me to know how much he admires him.

"I am a big fan of Harry," he wrote, "and think he exemplifies the ideals of both of our respective nations, as well as the world, or at least what they should be. In this volatile political climate, on both sides of the border, as well as around the world, I think we need a bit more Harry."

And we certainly do.

Harry's children wrote an eloquent tribute that was carried in the New York Daily News on July 16. They, and many of us, want to keep alight and aloft the candle that helps Harry Chapin's important legacy live on and on.

I commend their tribute to the attention of the Senate.